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Gatorland: Survival of the Fittest among Florida's Mid-Tier Tourist Attractions

Abstract

A combination of factors in mid-20th century Florida gave rise to a unique form of business: the roadside attraction. A burgeoning middle class, widespread ownership of automobiles, and the new phenomenon of the two-week vacation sent tourists to Florida by the millions. Roadside attractions shared a number of common characteristics, including their dependence on impulse visits, the undercapitalized nature of their operations, and emphasis on a unique or exciting feature. While many of these attractions flourished in the mid-20th century, a series of changes beginning with the Federal Highway Act of 1956 ushered in conditions which would drive most roadside attractions out of business. The early years of Gatorland, a 15 acre roadside attraction begun in 1949, was typical in most aspects except for its ability to adapt and survive the changing economic and social forces that impacted Florida's tourist economy. This paper outlines the three generations of the Godwin family who have overseen the park. With each generation, the qualities of the leadership were sharply different in response to the evolving needs of the attraction.

In the early decades of the 20th century the majority of tourists coming to Florida were well-heeled members of America's elite classes seeking to escape the brutal northern winters. The deplorable condition of Florida's road system meant that long-distance travel was practical only via railroad. The interior of Florida remained largely unaffected by tourism as the railroads bypassed most of the state and funneled tourists directly to opulent resorts in the coastal cities of St. Augustine, Miami, and Tampa. All this would change in the years following World War II, when ownership of an automobile had become commonplace and the recently established custom of the two-week vacation meant that a new type of tourist was interested in visiting Florida.¹ Middle-class Americans now had the opportunity to come to Florida, and the state

¹ Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*. (Washington DC: GPO, 1975), 717.

embarked on a road-building boom in hope of encouraging tourism, which was rapidly evolving into a vital piece of Florida's economy. As tourists were liberated from the pre-planned routes laid down by the railroad, thousands of restaurants, hotels, and tourist attractions sprang up alongside the newly constructed highways to service the automobile travelers. For many who traveled by automobile, the journey itself was an enjoyable part of their vacation experience. Driving along the back roads of America harkened to an element of wanderlust that let them seek out experiences in new environments.²

For most of the 20th century, the beach was the main attraction for tourists in Florida. A 1939 survey revealed that almost 60% of tourists said their primary purpose in coming to Florida was for beaches and water sports.³ As late as 1967, a private study commissioned by the Disney Corporation revealed that only 8% of visitors to the state indicated they looked forward to attending any sort of commercial attraction.⁴ Even though most tourists were heading to the beach, local entrepreneurs were eager to provide the visitors with a brief diversion while they were on the tiresome, hot drive through the state. New businesses that provided necessities such as gasoline, food, and cheap lodging proliferated alongside the highways, but travelers could also be coaxed into an impulse stop at roadside attractions to break up the monotony of the journey. These attractions used colorful names to lure visitors with a promise of Floridian splendor: The Museum of Sunken Treasure, Rattlesnake Headquarters, Gatorama, or Neptune's Garden typified such attractions. Most of these roadside attractions were small, under-capitalized

² John Jakle and Keith Sculle, *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press), 2-3

³ Work Projects Administration of Florida. *The Florida Tourist: A Preliminary Report*. (Jacksonville, September 1939), 6.

⁴ E.R.A. Economic Research Associates, "Economic Impact of Disney World, Florida," January 1967, Harrison "Buz" Price Papers, University of Central Florida, p. II-5.

operations which relied on the natural wonders of Florida to dazzle visitors. A plot of land, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a catchy theme was often all that was needed to entice travelers to pull over for a brief stop.

One such entrepreneur was Owen Godwin, the founder and sustaining force behind Gatorland, a roadside attraction established in 1949. Owen was a larger-than-life character born in 1905 in Rattlesnake Hammock, a tiny town in central Florida. Most of his younger years were spent on a cattle ranch, where he developed an early appreciation for the outdoors. In an era when most young boys fixated on Babe Ruth or Dick Tracey, Owen had discovered Frank Buck, the animal collector and jungle adventurer whose life was immortalized in the best-selling memoir, *Bring 'Em Back Alive* (1930). Buck's fearless exploits in the far-flung jungles of the world made for terrific entertainment, and soon he was starring as himself in movies based on his adventures. Young Owen Godwin, who had a fierce love of the outdoors, found Frank Buck to be the living embodiment of the dashing adventurer that Godwin one day hoped to emulate.

Although Godwin might have craved a life of adventure, most of his young adulthood was spent in mundane occupations, such as work as a butcher, postal worker, ranch hand, and fruit packer. It was a hardscrabble life, but Godwin's entrepreneurial spirit was always searching for an opportunity to earn more income. When he was packing fruit, he earned money by juicing the oranges and selling it in gallon containers at his brother's gas station. When he saw that students at the local college were having a hard time getting their textbooks, he bought books in bulk and tried to set up an off-campus bookshop. None of his ventures proved very profitable, but he kept searching for a means of establishing a healthy business.

In 1933 Godwin married Pearl Warren, a woman he met from the local church choir, and they had four children within the next five years. By this time Godwin was running a sandwich shop, and turning a modest profit from a pool table and card room that was attached to the back of the restaurant. Godwin was a hard working man, but like all of his various jobs, his work at the restaurant was merely a form of income, not something which captured his imagination or provided any sense of fulfillment. Despite the workaday nature of these modest jobs, Godwin was already morphing into the outsized personality that would make him famous. Craving the role of an outdoorsman like his hero Frank Buck, he strolled about his small hometown in safari jodhpurs, tall boots, and kept a pet alligator in his backyard. He pounced on any chance he could to escape into the dense Florida brush for hunting, fishing, or exploring the wild.

The end of World War II brought a tidal wave of tourism to Florida, and at last Godwin spotted an opportunity to capitalize on his love of the outdoors. If tourists might be coaxed into pulling over to see a rattlesnake or a collection of sea shells, would they stop to see alligators? Godwin was convinced that everyone coming to Florida was interested in seeing three things: palm trees, flamingos, and alligators.... and he could provide all three. He had never liked the way animals were displayed in typical cramped, unrealistic roadside attractions, and knew he could do better. Rather than constructing ugly cages or pens, he would create a business that would capitalize on the natural splendor of the Florida wilderness as a backdrop for his alligator attraction.

In order to be successful, a roadside attraction needed to be inexpensive, visible from a well-traveled road, and have an eye-catching entrance to snag the attention of tourists. Godwin's first challenge was to find an affordable plot of land close to a major

road. The primary means of north-south traffic through Florida were US 27 and US 1, but land alongside these popular routes was not affordable. The Orange Blossom Trail, also known as US 17-92, was less well traveled but had strong potential for future growth. Not only was this property affordable, but it had the added attraction of ready-made borrow pits. When the road had been built, a great deal of fill dirt had to be dug out, creating the long stretches of depressions that naturally filled with water. While these borrow pits made the land unattractive for orange groves or housing, it was perfect for displaying alligators. Godwin purchased a long strip of fifteen acres, complete with ready-made borrow pits, along the Orange Blossom Trail.

By this time, Owen's four children ranged in age from Owen Jr. at 15 down to the youngest, Frank at age 10. The entire family was recruited to get the raw land into shape. Palmettos had to be hacked out, weeds cleared, swampland drained, and a rudimentary building constructed. Central Florida is a land dense with vegetation, snakes, and insects, and all three presented fierce challenges to a family which didn't have access to power tools. Although the majority of the work was carried out by Owen and his young family, a few Seminole Indians were hired to construct a thatched roof building that would become the gift shop. Sticking close to a form of architecture that would speak of an authentic Florida experience, the gift shop was made of cypress poles, a palm thatched roof, and a sawdust floor. The Seminole workers also helped build a wooden walkway that led across the borrow pit directly to the gift shop. On the side of the property, they built three Seminole "chikees," or small houses. A chikee was a simple construction of cypress poles, a thatched roof, and a flat wood deck raised a few feet off the ground. It was here that the workers lived during the early years of Gatorland.

The land Owen bought did not have palm trees, and he was convinced that people wanted to see palm trees when they visited Florida, so he transplanted some to the property. He filled the borrow pits with alligators, brought some flamingoes on to the property, and built a few display cases for snakes. It was 1949, and Owen Godwin was ready for business.

Naming the attraction proved to be a challenge. Hoping to distinguish himself from some of the other kitschy Florida attractions that sported mermaids or lost pirate treasure, the attraction was first called the Florida Wildlife Institute. Quickly deciding the name sounded too much like a government bureaucracy, the attraction was renamed Snake Village and Alligator Farm. This name also had problems, as Godwin believed that women would be squeamish about getting out of their cars to see snakes. In 1954 he finally came up with a name that had the right combination of excitement, description, and memorability: *Gatorland, The Alligator Capital of the World*.

The question of what to charge for admission proved problematic. In the very early days, a small admission fee was charged, but few people were willing to pay. After a few months of almost no traffic, Godwin decided that the word “Free” would be a powerful draw. And he was right. Doing away with an admission fee was a gutsy move. Now the beach-going tourists were more than willing to get out of their car to stroll about the attraction, and Godwin was hoping that enough revenue could be gleaned from the gift shop, soft drink sales, and voluntary donations to keep the attraction afloat.

It wasn't. A table was set up near the exit of the park where donations could be left, but Godwin quickly learned that the donation table needed to be staffed. If no one was there, tourists were happy to stroll by without leaving anything. Even with a stern-

faced Owen Godwin standing there, donations were slim. Owen also learned that donations increased when the table was staffed by a passle of bedraggled-looking Godwin children and later grandchildren, because it helped generate more revenue.⁵

It quickly became apparent that revenues were not adequate to support the operation. Tourism in Florida was still heavily concentrated in the winter months, with few or no visitors venturing down during the sultry months between May and November. Ever the entrepreneur, Owen decided that if the tourists were not coming south during the summer, he would go north. Thus, Owen Godwin began an annual summer pilgrimage to the northern states, hauling a large alligator with the colorful name of Cannibal Jake in a specially built trailer. Godwin was a longtime member of the Lions Club, and he used that connection to his advantage on his trips up north. He would pull over in small towns and would introduce himself to the leader of the local Lions Club, and in exchange for a modest donation he got permission to set up in the town square for a few days.

Townpeople could see the alligator for a small fee, usually a dime. For three months each year he would travel up and down the east coast, showing Cannibal Jake to people who had never been to Florida or seen a living alligator. After his first summer on the road, Owen came back to Florida with \$7,500 in small change, enough money to keep the park operating and a little bit extra for expansion.⁶

Owen Godwin continued his annual northern sojourns with Cannibal Jake throughout most of the 1950's. Although these trips were essential for keeping the business afloat, it was hard on his family. After having lived through the Depression, Owen's wife Pearl always craved a sense of security, which Gatorland's trickle of

⁵ Diane Godwin McHugh, interviewed by the author, Orlando FL, 12 March 2008.

⁶ Owen Godwin Jr., interviewed by the author, Lutz Florida, 19 May 2008.

revenue and her husband's extended absences did not provide. While Owen was gone, his children shouldered the responsibility for tending the alligators and keeping the park open. Pearl worked daily to make fudge and sandwiches to sell to the trickle of visitors. Godwin's skills as a gambler also proved to be vital to underwriting much of this early expansion. Back-room card gambling was illegal, but was something at which Godwin excelled. He gladly played into the early hours of the morning, almost always winning more than he lost. According the family lore, the majority of these winnings were plowed directly into Gatorland, funding the expansion of the gift shop, a small snack shop, and an extensive series of boardwalks which stretched over the gator-filled borrow pits.

Although Godwin had no formal training in business or the entertainment industry, his instincts for showmanship were good and he was naturally incorporating many of the features that are essential for creating a successful theme park... a distinctly different operation than an amusement park. Amusement parks focus on physical gratification through thrill rides, games of skill, and touches of curiosities. Northeast Florida was dense with amusement parks in the golden age of Florida tourism, with small parks featuring miniature golf, Ferris wheels, and log rides.⁷ Theme parks are distinctly different. Rather than providing a physical sense of amusement, theme parks provide a mental and aesthetic experience through carefully orchestrated landscape, architecture, costumed personnel, merchandizing, and food selections all coordinated to support the sense of being in another place.⁸ People are seeking an experience that takes them out of

⁷ Tim Hollis, *Florida's Miracle Strip: From Redneck Riviera to Emerald Coast* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

⁸ Margaret J King, "Theme and Amusement Parks," in *The Encyclopedia of Recreation and Leisure in America* (Woodbridge, CT: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004), 363-65.

their ordinary environment and plunges them into a world of fantasy, nature, or adventure. One of the selling points of a theme park is that it can deliver the illusion of adventure in a very controlled environment..... a risky activity that is risk-free.

Although run on a shoestring budget, Gatorland delivered the themed experience of Florida in spectacular fashion. Surrounded by towering pine trees draped in Spanish moss, with acres of borrow pits swarming with alligators, and the air filled with the cries of egrets, cranes, and herons, Gatorland captured the natural beauty of old world Florida which delighted northern tourists. As the park took shape, almost half a mile of elevated boardwalks were built throughout the attraction, passing over alligator pits, alongside nesting birds, and even meandering through preserved stretches of Florida wetlands. The restaurants served inexpensive, down home favorites such as smoked barbeque, cold beer, homemade fudge, and of course, deep-fried alligator.

Owen Godwin never attempted to compete with amusement parks by offering rides or games. He focused on wildlife, allowing visitors the alluring thrill of getting close to an alligator in a realistic setting. In an era before televisions and video games populated every home, people were more easily awed by the sight of hundreds of ancient alligators lazily swimming through the borrow pits of Gatorland.

Eventually, the dimes and quarters generated from Godwin's annual sojourns up north provided Gatorland with enough revenue to fund its first serious expansion in 1956. The original cypress and thatch-roof gift shop was pulled down, and a new building of concrete block was installed, although it was still faced with materials to lend it an old Florida appearance. Attached to the gift shop, a private home was constructed, in which Owen Godwin, his wife Pearl, and youngest son Frank took up residence. Frank was

nearing high school graduation, and had spent most of his life working at Gatorland in one capacity or another. From the first months of clearing palmetto stumps and weeds, through his years building the boardwalks, manning the donation table, and tending the alligators, Frank knew Gatorland from the ground up.

After high school graduation, Frank was restless and ready to see something of the world. He volunteered for the army in 1957 and served three years in New York and a brief stint in Korea. He was soon ready to come home, and it seemed inevitable that he would go to work at Gatorland, where his father desperately wanted Frank's know-how and ability to shoulder hard work. Gatorland was swelling in popularity, attracting thousands of visitors on the weekends and the park was in need of more attractions, boardwalks, and snackshop area to accommodate the crowds.

It was becoming clear that Gatorland, like many of the successful Florida attractions, was going to become a family-business that stretched across generations. Among Florida's notable family run theme parks are Parrot Jungle (Miami, Scherr family)⁹, Cypress Gardens (Polk County, Pope family)¹⁰ Everglades Wonder Garden (Bonita Springs, Piper family), Monkey Jungle (Miami, DuMond family), and Orchid Jungle (Homestead, Fennell family). All of these early attractions shared similar business practices. The operation of a theme park is both capital and labor intensive, with steep start-up costs and little guarantee of return. All of these parks had very modest beginnings in rural, undeveloped areas where inexpensive land could be purchased. They relied on the unpaid labor of family members and children in their earliest years, and took

⁹ Cory Gittner, *Miami's Parrot Jungle and Gardens: The Colorful History of an Uncommon Attraction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

¹⁰ Stephen E. Branch, "The Salesman and his Swamp: Dick Pope's Cypress Gardens," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. 80 no. 2 (2002): 483-503.

on very little or no debt. As the parks showed signs of success, improvements were made in a piecemeal fashion. These parks began in the mid-twentieth century, in an emerging market that was being fed by a stream of tourists hungry for a brief diversion on their sojourn to the beach. At this time it was still possible for small, family-run start-ups to create a foothold in the market before the mega-theme parks raised expectations to the point that it was impossible for a modest attraction to get off the ground.¹¹

After his army service, Frank Godwin returned to Gatorland, working side by side with his father to operate the park. One of the first tasks undertaken by Frank was the challenge of giving Gatorland a more impressive entrance. Most classic roadside attractions have unabashed, eye-catching signage to snag the eye of passing travelers. Sarasota's Reptile Farm & Zoo had a giant cut-out sign of an elephant, Weeki Wachee had the famous towering sculpture of aquatic performers, and the Miami Serpenterium had a 35 foot high concrete hooded cobra. The entrance of an attraction should depict not only the theme the attraction would deliver, but suggest an atmosphere of fun and adventure.¹² Given that most visitors pulled over to these attractions on impulse, it was essential that the appearance from the road be intriguing enough to warrant a stop.

Frank knew the entrance should feature an alligator, but took a while deciding what form it should take. He brought an alligator skull home and turned it every which way, searching for the most impressive manner of presenting such an image to the public. Finally he hit on the idea of having a pair of giant, gaping gator jaws serve as the entrance through which visitors would pass through when entering the park. Frank

¹¹ There is one notable exception to this statement. *Dinosaur World* in Plant City began in 1998, founded by an enterprising Swedish immigrant who dreamed of creating a theme park in Florida. *Dinosaur World* is a modest, family run attraction that has found a niche among low-cost, child-oriented entertainment. Randy Diamond, "Roadside Dinosaur Attraction is Thriving," *Tampa Tribune*, 15 Aug 2005, p.1.

¹² Jakle, 118.

consulted a welder, who confirmed that a rebar steel frame could be made which would support a concrete and plaster overlay. Although Owen Godwin was skeptical, he gave his son the go-ahead. “I was only twenty-two and had never done anything like this, so it was pretty gutsy of him to go along with it,” Frank said.¹³ As the spectacular entrance took shape, it was obvious that it would be a hit. “Frank, you’ll be about half-famous for building this thing,” Owen said to his son.¹⁴ In the coming years the gator mouth would feature prominently not only in Gatorland advertising, but in tourist books, architectural magazines, and pop culture. The mouth has been trademarked, and successfully fended off competitors who attempted similar designs.

Over the years, Owen and Frank settled into distinctive areas of responsibility. Frank was a jack of all trades, a young man who liked nothing better than to head out into the park with a hammer and repair the buildings, tend to the alligators, or oversee the construction of a new attraction. He quickly became indispensable as a behind-the-scenes wonderkid who kept the increasingly complex park operations in smooth working order. On the other hand, one of Gatorland’s best promotional tools was Owen Godwin himself. As the attraction grew and prospered in the late 1950’s, Owen began growing into an outsized, larger-than-life personality. He fully embraced the persona of the intrepid adventurer, wearing kakis with tall boots, a leopard vest, and a fedora hat sporting a rattlesnake hatband. He’d use that hat as a prop, sometimes waving it over the snakepit to the delight of the tourists.¹⁵ This public image of the intrepid outdoorsman was an important part of Gatorland’s promotion. To the public, Owen Godwin was a

¹³ Frank Godwin, interview by author, Orlando FL, 3 March 2008.

¹⁴ Michael Blumfield, “Greeting from Gatorland: Frank Godwin Carries on a Family Tradition Started in 1949.” *Orlando Sentinel*, 28 Jan 1993, sec. E1.

¹⁵ Mike Godwin, interview by author, Orlando FL, 12 March 2008.

gregarious showman eager to glad-hand with tourists and share his knowledge of the animal kingdom. His photograph routinely appeared in articles covering Gatorland and he loved to stride about the streets of downtown Kissimmee in his full safari apparel. He was Frank Buck, P.T. Barnum, and Walt Disney rolled into one man. Although Godwin's flamboyant image was a great marketing tool, it was not something he shed at the end of the day. The clothes, the tall tales, the rugged outdoorsman...this was who he became. "He morphed into that personality, and that became his blood," says his granddaughter.¹⁶

Godwin wanted more than just *the image* of the grand outdoorsman, he wanted to *be* it. As Gatorland began earning a healthy return, Owen embarked on a series of safaris throughout the world. He traveled to Africa to hunt big game, Alaska to fish, and South America to search for animals to ship back to Gatorland. He brought back zebras, pythons, monkeys, and ostriches to display at the park. From South America he brought a tapir and a pygmy hippo. The original theme of a park featuring Florida wildlife was set aside in order to show the prized animals Owen brought back from his travels.

Despite his image as a vigorous outdoorsman, when Godwin was only sixty-four he suffered a heart attack, which forced him to confront his own mortality. Although his family members were providing a substantial amount of the labor at Gatorland, all of the power and decision-making was handled by Owen Godwin alone. As the founder and driving force behind the creation of Gatorland, he considered himself to be the best person to lead the company. He rarely consulted with others involved in the company, and until the time of his heart attack his style of leadership was uniformly described as autocratic. Prompted by his illness, Godwin established the Gatorland Corporation in

¹⁶ Godwin McHugh, interview, 12 March.

1969, at which time he also created a Board of Directors to whom he distributed small shares of stock. Composed entirely of his immediate family, the Board of Directors had little to do other than advising and consenting to Owen's ideas. This would change as some of the Godwin children, now young adults, saw developments looming on the horizon that would threaten the long-term viability of Gatorland.

The 1970s: A Perfect Storm of Disaster for Mid-Tier Tourist Attractions

Like many roadside attractions, Gatorland spent very little on advertising, depending primarily on the gator mouth to do its job snagging the tourist's attention as they drove through central Florida toward the beach. A research study done by 3M in the mid-1960s revealed that 29% of tourists traveling through Florida by automobile had no plans at the beginning of the day, they would simply drive and stop wherever their fancy took them. Another 49% had no definite itinerary or stops planned other than trying to get to a certain town by nightfall.¹⁷ As a major manufacturer of reflective paint used in highway signage, 3M was eager to convince hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions of the importance of roadside signage.

Although Owen was skeptical about investing in expensive advertising, his son Frank needed no convincing of the need to expand their promotional efforts. The biggest threat to Gatorland's survival was being constructed in a giant X-shaped swath through central Florida. Orlando was soon to be the beneficiary of two major road projects, the Florida Turnpike and Interstate 4. The phenomenon of limited access freeways was part of Dwight Eisenhower's 1956 Highway Act, which would build 44,000 miles of new

¹⁷ Anonymous, "Florida's Hosting Industry: Poised on the Threshold of Change," *Florida Trend*, June 1965, 24-5.

highways and cost an estimated \$25 billion.¹⁸ In light of the massive public expenditure, President Eisenhower was careful to highlight the military defense aspect of the roads. This emphasis on military expediency may have lulled some business owners into underestimating the impact the new highways would have on existing businesses. One government official from north Florida was quoted, “the New Federal system will be designed primarily as military highways....with no gasoline stations, no restaurants, and no tourist attractions along the way.” He concluded that “the majority of our tourists will prefer to continue using our present highways.”¹⁹

This was not to be the case. The new highways were an immediate boon to the harried traveler, and plenty of restaurants and gas stations rushed to open services along the highways. It was a disaster for roadside attractions. No longer would travelers stopped at traffic signals be easily lured by the sight of a gaping alligator mouth or billboard beckoning the traveler to a sight just around the corner. Much like towns that withered and died if the railroad bypassed them, the gas stations, motels, and roadside attractions along Florida’s minor highways watched their livelihood drain away as soon as the high-speed interstates went into operation in the late 1960s. Business magazines of the time urged those who could afford it to quickly relocate to the major exits off the highways.²⁰

Gatorland saw an immediate drop in attendance as soon as the new highways opened.²¹ Owen Godwin, who had always run Gatorland on a shoestring budget, was

¹⁸ Richard F. Weingroff, “Essential to The National Interest,” *Public Roads*, March/April 2006, <http://www.tfhrc.gov/pubrds/06mar/07.htm>

¹⁹ Even P. Bennett, “Highways to Heaven or Roads to Ruin? The Interstate Highway System and the Fate of Starke, Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 78 no. 2 (2000): 451-467. p. 463.

²⁰ *Florida Trend*, 20-25.

²¹ Frank Godwin, interview, 25 March.

reluctantly persuaded by Frank to expand their advertising. Billboards were rented, and two-sided brochures were sent out to motel lobbies and tourist stops. Gatorland is only five miles off Florida's Turnpike, but it was out of the line of sight of the famous gator mouth, and few out-of-state tourists would have ever heard of the attraction unless the Godwins made a harder effort to get its name out there. Most of the billboards were cut into the shape of alligators and gave directions to the park. The signs were scattered across a sixty-mile radius in an attempt to get people in the car talking about the attraction and prepared to turn off at the all-important exit.

Dwindling crowds meant dwindling donations. Gatorland appears to have been the only substantial theme park that did not charge admission, and this was a model that could not be sustained. Most theme parks derive a little over half their revenue from admission tickets, with sales of food, beverages, and merchandise accounting for another forty percent.²² Donations at Gatorland continued to be lackluster, and revenue from the snack bar and gift shop simply could no longer sustain the park. In 1970, Owen Godwin was finally persuaded by his children that he needed to start charging admission. Adults were charged one dollar, and children fifty cents.

There was an immediate drop in attendance as soon as Gatorland began charging an entrance fee. The single word "FREE" had been a big part of their appeal, and the family estimated they lost around half their visitors as soon as they began charging admission.²³ The upside was that the people who were willing to pay admission treated the park better than those who only came because it was free. There was a decrease in people leaving trash around the place, rambunctious kids who would taunt the alligators,

²² *Amusement and Theme Parks in the U.S.*, IBISWorld Industry Report, Nov. 2007, 9.

²³ Frank Godwin, interview, 25 March.

and some even dangled babies out over the gator pits as a joke. Charging admission seemed to help weed out this sort of visitor.

The Florida Attractions Association and the Growing Sophistication of Roadside Attractions

Charging admission brought a side benefit, in that it finally allowed Gatorland to become a member of the Florida Attractions Association. This professional organization had been an important player in safeguarding Florida's reputation as a place for a quality family vacation. As the tourism industry became more lucrative, some of the entrepreneurs from the tourist industry began to pay more attention to a problem that had been lurking among the quaint and kitschy roadside attractions. Tourists felt cheated when they stopped at an attraction, paid the fee, and then were shown nothing more than a few snakes in a box or fraudulent antiques. Dirty or substandard facilities, cheap souvenirs, maltreated animals, or attractions which advertised far more than they delivered were giving the entire tourist attraction industry a bad name. In 1949, the owners of Cypress Gardens, Monkey Jungle, Silver Springs, and Parrot Jungle banded together to form the Florida Attractions Association (FAA). Other attractions were invited to join if they could prove clean restrooms, fair pricing, and willingness to abide by FAA standards for quality. Participating members benefited by inclusion in the FAA's official brochure and map, a resource that was freely distributed at rest stops and heavily used by tourists. Membership swelled to over 150 attractions and helped restore the tarnished reputation of Florida's tourist attractions.

Membership in the FAA connoted a level of quality that attracted tourists, but in order to be accepted for membership, the attraction had to charge an admission fee, which precluded Gatorland from joining this useful association. Once Gatorland finally began charging a modest admission in 1970 they were anxious to attain membership in the prestigious association. The primary benefit of membership would be the inclusion in the FAA's official map of Florida's attractions, but a side benefit was the networking that occurred among other attraction owners, all of whom shared similar concerns with promoting, developing, and insuring political clout among the attraction industry. For the most part, the owners of attractions were supportive of one another, rather than competitive. Membership in the organization was selective, and the geographic dispersal of the attractions meant that members generally did not view each other as direct competitors. Yet when Gatorland tried to join, they met with resistance from the St. Augustine Alligator Farm, a long-time member of the FAA. The Godwin family was well-liked among several of the other family-owned attraction owners and with the help of that sponsorship, they were granted admission to the FAA in 1973. Although Owen Godwin was still the sole owner and CEO of Gatorland, his son Frank was assuming most of the administrative duties, and became Gatorland's delegate to the FAA.

One morning in 1975, Owen awoke with a sore arm. Concerned that he could barely move the arm, he went to the hospital, where he was diagnosed as having suffered a stroke. Five days later, he was dead at the age of sixty-nine. Until the morning he awoke with that sore arm, Owen Godwin had been the public face of Gatorland. He was the patriarch of the Godwin family, and his personality of part-entrepreneur, part showman had dominated the family dynamics for decades. His death was a blow to the

family, but operations in the park continued without missing a beat. Frank Godwin had been handling the daily operations and managing the books for years, and was well trained to take over management of the park. A family meeting was called, and it was unanimously- agreed that Frank would be appointed the new CEO of Gatorland.

In many ways, Frank shared his father's style of leadership. With the exception of a few years in the army, Frank had lived at Gatorland since the age of ten and knew every square inch of the park. He had strong opinions on how things should be done and most of the family members naturally deferred to him. Frank shared his father's habit of employing family members in key positions throughout the park. Although Gatorland was now expanding into a major corporation, its back-office operations were handled by family members with almost no formal training or related experience for the work they were performing at Gatorland.

Frank's decision making differed in one major way from his father. Even before Owen died, Frank was pushing Gatorland in new directions, sensing that the challenges to the park's survival were growing ominous. It was at Frank's urging that admission was charged. Frank's more aggressive approach toward advertising with pricey billboards had helped steer tourists off the new highspeed interstates and toward the now off-the-beaten track nature park. Frank was also considering adding a small stadium that could host live performances, another crucial feature to compete with larger, better-funded theme parks. This new drive to establish a competitive edge was crucial, because Walt Disney had already identified central Florida as the future home of the biggest tourist attraction in the world.

Walt Disney was attracted to central Florida because of the favorable climate, large expanses of cheap land, and the convergence of major highways through the region. Very few people visited central Florida other than as a way station on their trip to the beach. In the late 1960's, Miami and neighboring Ft. Lauderdale were drawing almost six times the number of visitors that came to Orlando.²⁴ All that would change with the arrival of Disney World.

Walt Disney had learned a valuable lesson with Disneyland in Anaheim, California, which quickly became landlocked by strip malls, billboards, and gaudy shops that Disney could not control. Unlike the small family-owned attractions, Disney could afford the massive capitalization costs to purchase enough land to ensure his new park would never suffer from the encroachment of undesirable neighbors. Once the central Florida site selection was finalized, a covert operation for the quiet acquisition of land was orchestrated, involving several dummy corporations and real estate agents, until the company had acquired over 27,000 acres of land (43 square miles.)

Aside from the obvious issue of its massive size, Disney World was a departure from most theme parks in Florida that featured some aspect of the state's natural beauty or cultural history. The experience of Disney World was one of sanitized, simulated reality. Rather than feature the tropical splendor of Florida, Disney created a homogenized environment that cobbled together the most attractive features of environments from around the country. Mainstreet USA, the shopping entryway through which every tourist must pass to enter the Magic Kingdom, is a nostalgic recreation of Walt Disney's hometown of Marcelene, Missouri. Frontierland celebrates the wide

²⁴ Elise C. Jones, ed. *Florida Statistical Abstract*, (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1970) p. 528-29.

expanses of the American west, while Liberty Square is themed after Colonial America. The only thing particularly “Florida” about Walt Disney World is its geographic location.

Operators of nearby tourist attractions were uncertain of the impact Disney would have on their business, but they were hopeful it would prove a positive addition. A private research study commissioned by Disney projected a 10% attendance increase at existing tourist attractions, driven by the larger number of tourists visiting the area.²⁵ Foremost among the people who believed Disney World would be a positive boon to the existing tourist attractions was Dick Pope, founder and owner of Cypress Gardens, a popular attraction located about an hour away from Orlando. In reference to the coming of Disney World, he optimistically stated: “I think Walt Disney World will be a great thing for the state and for all the established attractions.”²⁶ Businesses dependent upon tourism in Miami failed to see the threat Disney presented. “Disney World is going to promote Florida and bring millions of first-time visitors to the state; ergo, Disney World must help, not hurt, Miami Beach.”²⁷

Frank Godwin was equally optimistic. He had been asked by builders at Disney World to help scout some of the land they were developing for dangerous snakes and reptiles. He did so, and got to know a few of the Disney executives who told him that Disney was projecting year-round popularity of their theme park, a major departure for the Florida tourism industry. At this time, tourism in Florida flourished only in the winter, and the prospect of earning substantial revenue during the other seasons was almost too good to be true.

²⁵ E.R.A., “Economic Impact of Disney World,” I-4.

²⁶ Anonymous, “Walt Disney World: A New Dimension in Florida’s Future,” *Florida Trend*, September 1970, 45.

²⁷ Paul J.C. Friedlander, “Miami: Worries About Disney World,” *The New York Times*, 4 April 1971 sec XX 51.

In terms of the year-round popularity of Disney World, the executives at Disney were right. Families were willing to brave the sweltering summer heat in order to bring their children on the pilgrimage to see Mickey Mouse. In 1970, approximately 3.5 million tourists visited central Florida, but when Disney opened the following year, the theme park attracted a staggering 11 million visitors.²⁸ In its earliest years, the focus of Disney World was almost entirely on entertaining children. This meant that the door was wide open for other local attractions to siphon off Disney's visitors for a day or two. People looking for a change of pace from kiddie rides could easily visit Gatorland, Cypress Gardens, or the Kennedy Space Center. Demand for Disney exceeded its ability to accommodate all its customers, which also helped nearby attractions. During peak season, there were reports of traffic jams stretching fifteen miles leading up to Disney.²⁹ This proved beneficial for Gatorland. According to Frank Godwin, for the first few years after Disney opened, Gatorland enjoyed a temporary swell in attendance due to the spillover phenomenon as well as more visitors during non-traditional months for Florida tourism.³⁰

The reprieve was short lived. SeaWorld, a 125-acre park featuring marine wildlife, opened an Orlando park in 1973. The nature-loving visitors who were attracted to Gatorland were precisely the type who were likely to be siphoned off to the better capitalized SeaWorld, and this quickly cut into Gatorland's short-lived bump in attendance. Disney World quickly expanded in size, mitigating the problem of turning away visitors when the park was full.

²⁸ Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005) 105.

²⁹ Anonymous. "Jam-Up at Vacation Spots," *U.S. News and World Report* 2 Feb. 1976, p. 26.

³⁰ Frank Godwin, interview, 25 March.

The mega-theme parks had substantial clout with state and local planning officials. Disney was powerful enough to ask for and receive exits from the major highways directly onto their property.³¹ SeaWorld also received an exit to their park located alongside the heavily traveled I-4. Meanwhile, smaller attractions were clinging to the thin trickle of tourists who still used the back roads. Casper's Ostrich & Alligator Farm ultimately closed after the completion of I-95. Traffic at Tom Gaskin's wonderful Cypress Knee Museum dried up after the Florida turnpike was completed, although he would still open the shuttered building to curious visitors who had stopped by to see his legendary roadside attraction. Across the state, literally dozens of roadside attractions folded in the years following completion of the new highways and the opening of Disney World.

³¹ Richard E. Fogelson, *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). pp.73-75; 174-176.

Notable Roadside Attractions that closed in the years after the Completion of the Interstate Highway System and opening of Disney World

Name	Location	Years of Operation
Animal Land	St. Augustine	1958-67
Aquarium	St. Pete Beach	1964-1977
Birds of Prey	Lake Wales	1959-73
Cape Coral Gardens	Cape Coral	1968-77
Casper's Ostrich & Alligator Farm	St. Augustine	1946-82
Circus Hall of Fame	Sarasota	1956-80
Cypress Knee Museum	Palmdale	1951-93
Deer Ranch	Silver Springs	1954-75
Dog Land	Chiefland	1960-74
Everglades Tropical Gardens	Clewiston	1954-75
Everglades Wildlife Park	Punta Gorda	1956-77
Floating Islands	Orange Lake	1936-74
Florida Reptile Institute	Silver Springs	1930-75
Florida Reptile Land	Lawtey	1950-75
Foxbower Wildlife Museum	Brooksville	1961-81
Frog City	Tamiami Trail	1960-92
Great Masterpiece	Lake Wales	1951-78
McKee Jungle Gardens	Vero Beach	1932-76
Miami Serpentarium	Miami	1948-84
Museum of Speed	Daytona	1954-77
Museum of Sunken Treasure	Cape Canaveral	1968-77
Nature's Giant Fishbowl	Homosassa Springs	1940-87
Okalee Indian Village	Dania	1962-78
Orchid Jungle	Homestead	1923-94
Parrot Village	Ormond Beach	1956-71
Pirate's World	Dania	1967-75
Ponce de Leon Springs	DeLand	1953-74
Rainbow Springs	Dunnellon	1937-74
Rare Bird Farm	Kendall	1938-67
Sarasota Reptile Farm & Zoo	Sarasota	1947-68
Sea-Orama	Clearwater Beach	1954-68
Sea Zoo	South Daytona	1951-70
Tarpon Zoo & Animal Compound	Tarpon Springs	1961-75
Tiki Gardens	Indian Shores	1963-88

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³² Excerpted from the research of Ken Breslauer, *Roadside Paradise: The Golden Age of Florida's Tourist Attractions, 1929-71*. (St. Petersburg: RetroFlorida, inc., 2000).

Compared to the numerous attractions that folded, Gatorland was well-positioned because they were located less than 15 miles from Disney World. It was an easy jaunt for a traveler weary of “It’s A Small World.” For the theme parks located further afield, the response to Disney’s opening was more immediate, and more desperate. The mermaids at Weeki Wachee, approximately two hours away from Disney reported that attendance dropped sharply off because “everybody was over in the middle of the state.”³³ Cypress Gardens was almost an hour away from Disney, close enough for an easy day trip, but still a hard sell for people with a bounty of attractive theme parks in the immediate Orlando area. Benefiting from its reputation as a premier Florida attraction, Cypress Gardens managed to maintain its attendance in the 1970s, but their numbers began eroding quickly thereafter.³⁴ Known primarily for its fabulous gardens, stately southern belles, and water-skiing shows, Cypress Gardens was an attraction that appealed to an older generation and it was difficult to attract families with children away from Mickey and Shamu.

Adapting to Survive

Like other theme parks, Gatorland needed to adapt to the challenges of the mega-parks in order to survive. Prior to the coming of Disney, visiting Gatorland was a passive experience. The park featured hundreds of animals, gorgeous scenery, and was overflowing with friendly staff, but this sort of attraction paled in comparison with the technological wizardry available at Disney just a few miles away. Numerous research

³³ Lou Vickers, *Weeki Wachee: A History of One of Florida’s Oldest Roadside Attractions* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). 190.

³⁴ Branch, 498-500.

studies suggest that the introduction of new shows and rides are essential to keeping a tourist attraction's attendance up.³⁵ Live entertainment adds an element of excitement that can not be had from merely observing animals in their natural state. This is especially true of alligators, which tend to spend the majority of their day laying in the sun. Frank oversaw the construction of an eight hundred seat venue built to showcase an alligator wrestling show. Other shows featured nature talks and Gator Jumparoo, in which alligators were trained to jump several feet out of the water to snatch a dead, store-bought chicken from a trainer's hand. In an effort to emphasize their authenticity as a classic Florida attraction, the exotic animals Owen Godwin brought back from his safaris were not replaced once they died. A renewed emphasis on old world Florida culture and wildlife once again took center stage at Gatorland, helping to foster a sense of charm and intimacy lacking in the larger theme parks.

Although Gatorland strived to make the park competitive with other attractions, Frank was anxious to capitalize on non-traditional sources of revenue that could be had from Gatorland. In 1977 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the American Alligator from the Endangered Species list.³⁶ Although there were still some restrictions on the trade in alligator products, it was now possible to legally manufacture and trade alligator hides and meat. With thousands of alligators swimming through his park, Frank recognized the possibility to capitalize on the new opportunity. Not only could he turn a profit from selling alligator products, but more importantly, he wanted to be able to market alligator farming to a curious public. If people were willing to tour wineries,

³⁵ Sandro Formica and Michael D. Olsen. "Trends in the Amusement Park Industry." *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*. 10 no. 7 (1998): 297-308. Bradley M. Braun and Mark D. Soskin, "Theme Park Competitive Strategies" *Annals of Tourism Research* 26, no. 2 (April 1999): 439-442.

³⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, *Most U.S. Alligators Come off Endangered List* (January 12, 1977).

candy factories, or orange groves, why not tour an alligator farm? “I was never interested in becoming a huge alligator farm, I was interested in being the *best* alligator farm that people could come see. The idea was to get them through the door. We could be a vertical organization and take it from the egg, all the way to the alligator belts in the gift shop....We wouldn’t just be a stagnant display anymore. We could show the whole process of farming.”³⁷

If Frank were to make alligator farming at Gatorland a reality, he knew he would need help. Almost nothing was known about alligator husbandry or best practices for rapid growth. Alligators rarely breed in captivity, and Gatorland sent a \$20,000 donation to the University of Florida to fund research into alligator husbandry. With the assistance of Dr. Paul Cardeilhac, a veterinarian from the University of Florida, Gatorland became the first place where artificial insemination of alligators was successfully accomplished.³⁸ Although the Godwin family was rightfully proud of their role in helping pioneer a new technology, it was apparent that the expense of artificial insemination could never make it a commercially viable way to operate an alligator farm.

Frank Godwin points to his work as a pioneer in the alligator farming industry as one of his proudest accomplishments. Because it was an entirely new industry, everything had to be discovered from scratch: the best ways to breed, develop networks to sell the products, establish shipping procedures, streamline operations, and preserve a healthy environment. It was this last detail that proved a sticking point for Frank. As the alligator population at Gatorland swelled to almost two thousand alligators, it proved difficult to divert enough of the effluent away from the ground water. The

³⁷ Frank Godwin, interview, 1 April.

³⁸ Anonymous, “Coming to Gators’ Aid” *Time*, 17 Sept. 1984, 70.

Environmental Protection Agency intervened, and set a standard for ground water purity that would require the installation of a multimillion-dollar treatment facility, far more costly than the modest returns the farming could produce. With reluctance, Frank moved the alligator farming operations off premises to a location in east Orange County.³⁹

Gatorland is still in the alligator farming business, selling their own alligator meat in their restaurant and alligator products in their gift shop. Surplus meat and hides are sold elsewhere throughout the United States and abroad.

There were other ways to capitalize on the natural beauty found at Gatorland. Television and film crews are often on the hunt for locations that simulate natural splendor, and Frank was happy to offer up his park for film shoots. Documentaries by the BBC, National Geographic, and Animal Planet have all used the wildlife at Gatorland to provide close-up clips of alligators in action. Sometimes alligators are used in feature films; Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, Ace Ventura, Swamp Thing, and Superboy all have featured scenes shot at Gatorland. Gatorland uses a sliding scale for what to charge, depending on the crew's needs and the financial resources of the company.⁴⁰

The revenue generated from alligator farming and film shoots was welcome, but not capable of sustaining the park if attendance continued to dwindle. By the late 1980's, Disney and SeaWorld, were attracting over 30 million visitors per year.⁴¹ In 1990 another major player, Universal Orlando, opened a mega-theme park in the area. The sheer size of the "Big Three" made it impossible to do a park justice in a single day, and all three parks started marketing multi-day passes, which allows a visitor to purchase

³⁹ Frank Godwin, interview, 7 April.

⁴⁰ Godwin McHugh, interview, 12 March.

⁴¹ Anonymous. *1988-89 Orlando Market Guide*. Sentinel Communications Co.: Orlando, 1989, 64.

admission to the park for several days at a substantial discount. Multi-day passes were a body blow to other area attractions. Once tourists had purchased admission for several days at a particular park, it became much harder to siphon them off to Gatorland.

In the early 1990's Gatorland had evolved to the extent that Frank Godwin was becoming disheartened and tired. What had once been a small family business now had more than one hundred employees, ever increasing governmental regulations, and a Board of Directors that was frustrated with Gatorland's declining attendance. While Frank liked nothing better than building his attraction and showing it to visitors, constant interference from governmental agencies was maddening. "All the regulations...the health department, building department, permitting department...it was totally ridiculous and I got burned out. Someone has always got a new regulation. Why the hell am I doing this when they are trying to *stop* me every time I turn around?"⁴²

Under Frank's leadership the size of the park had doubled, shows and exhibits had been added, and a roadside attraction had been transformed into a legitimate theme park. However, improving Gatorland's quality was not what was needed to save it. The size and sophistication of the park had resulted in increasingly complex business functions, yet the back office operations had not evolved alongside the rest of the park. "I have a publicity man," Frank had said in 1980, "but sometimes he helps me clean the gator pens."⁴³ Much of Gatorland's administration was handled by assorted Godwin family members or long-term employees who had been promoted into office positions. There were very few people at Gatorland who had a formal business training or management experience outside of the park. A consulting company hired in 1989 recommended wide-

⁴² Frank Godwin, interview, 1 April.

⁴³ Robert Johnson. "If You've Seen One Gator, You've Seen 'em All," *Florida Trend*, September 1980, 57.

ranging changes, including the addition of a professional finance director, marketing manager, and outside representation on the Board of Directors. Pearl Godwin, Owen's widow, had great influence on the Board of Directors. Although she rarely spoke at the meetings, she was the beloved matriarch of the Godwin family and her opinion tended to sway the group. Some family members were reluctant to introduce the widespread changes recommended by the consulting company, but Pearl's endorsement carried the day. The Board of Directors consented to the hiring of outside professionals to staff the key positions at Gatorland, although Frank retained his role as CEO.

By the early 1990's, the addition of a professional management team improved the back office operations and steered large projects through to completion, but it could not reverse problems caused by national downturns in the economy prompted by the first Gulf War and more aggressive competition from Orlando's larger attractions. If a solution to the dwindling gate count could not be found, Gatorland was likely to meet the fate of other mid-tier attractions which had folded during the 1970s and 80s.

Frustrated by the growing bureaucracy and Gatorland's slowly declining attendance, the nature of the work was no longer of interest to Frank Godwin. Rescuing the park was going to require a massive reorientation of its business operations, whereas Frank's strengths and interests lay in building the park and improving the attraction. Frank announced his retirement in 1996, and the hunt for a new CEO was on.

The next CEO of Gatorland would need to have a more formalized corporate approach and the resilience to make substantial changes in the traditional management of the park. For six months, a national head-hunting firm brought in a series of candidates to interview for the position, but they failed to find a person with all the qualities the

board wanted. Then an unlikely candidate tossed his hat in the ring. Frank's son-in-law, Mark McHugh, was a marine animal trainer at Sea World, just down the road from Gatorland. Mark had almost ten years of experience in the theme park industry, but very little of it was in management. Yet Mark had qualities that made him a potential fit for Gatorland. He was in the process of acquiring an MBA from the University of Central Florida and had a genuine love of wildlife, but most importantly, an innate talent for leadership. From his initial job as a whale trainer at Sea World, Mark had been promoted to handle troubleshooting for problematic departments at the Sea World parks in San Diego and Orlando. He had acquired a reputation for accomplishing difficult turnarounds, and thought he might have what it took to reorient the management at Gatorland. During a series of interviews it was made starkly clear to Mark that his status as Frank Godwin's son-in-law carried little protection: if he could not resurrect Gatorland's sagging attendance, he would not keep his job. In the summer of 1996 Mark McHugh was hired as Gatorland's third CEO.

For one month Frank mentored his son-in-law in the basic workings of the park, then he stepped aside and retired to Florida's Atlantic coast. Mark was smart, ambitious, and determined to turn around Gatorland's fortunes, but by his own admission, he lacked the experience to save him from some costly blunders. Knowing that Gatorland drew as many as a quarter of their visitors from Europe and Britain, Mark decided upon an advertising blitz in England that included magazine ads and advertisements on the side of London cabs. "We were putting all of our marketing dollars there. We stopped doing

billboards in the local area and thought we could sell the Brits before they got to Orlando. You can't do that."⁴⁴ As a result, attendance plunged in 1997 and 98.

In an effort to generate more profit, Mark cut expenses. His experience at Sea World had no revenue generating expectations beyond sticking to a budget. His natural inclination to economic downturns was to cut expenses, which is what he did at Gatorland. But this was not a long-term solution to Gatorland's problems, and once again, he needed to cast about for more creative solutions in order to stay alive.

Surviving in the New Millennium

After the disastrous slide during his early years at Gatorland, Mark became highly focused on generating revenue. In most theme parks, the price of admission should yield around 60% of revenue.⁴⁵ When Mark began work at Gatorland in 1996, they were averaging \$12 of revenue per person, which included admission, food, and retail. Ten years later, they were making \$32 per person, due primarily to an aggressive attempt to earn revenue from non-traditional means while customers were in the park.

Customers could always buy hotdogs to toss to the alligators, or get their picture taken standing next to an alligator. Revenue from these sources were modest, since the employees were lackluster in their efforts to sell the products. McHugh initiated an incentive program that rewarded employees for their ability to generate revenue. Each day the sales target would fluctuate, based upon the number of people attending the park. If an employee hit that target, whether they were selling items in the gift shop or hotdogs to toss to the alligators, they would earn a commission on every additional sale. Now

⁴⁴ Mark McHugh, interview by author, Orlando FL 7 April 2008.

⁴⁵ IbisWorld, p.9.

instead of waving goodbye to guests at the conclusion of an alligator wrestling show, the wrestler will earn a dollar commission for each portrait he is able to sell to a visitor. Every employee at Gatorland was eligible for the program. People who work in facilities could earn a monthly bonus if none of the equipment in their department broke down. Custodians could earn bonuses if their department had no work related injuries, a terrific incentive to ensure everyone observed safety regulations. Perhaps the most creative incentive is the REAP Award (Rewarding Employees for Accelerating Profit.) If an employee suggests an entrepreneurial idea that proves successful in generating revenue, they will be rewarded with 10% of the profit for three years. One such idea allows visitors to pose on the back of a live alligator in a carefully controlled environment. This idea generates approximately \$800,000 per year, of which 10% is funneled back to the employees who suggested the idea.⁴⁶

Mark also decided to aggressively pursue a demographic which Disney and the other big attractions had little interest in cultivating. The “pull-out sofa” crowd refers to tourists who visit Florida on a budget. Nearly one-half of the domestic vacationers visiting Florida stay with friends or family members, rather than in a hotel. Compared with visitors who stay in hotels, the pull-out sofa crowd are more price conscious, more likely to have arrived in Florida by automobile, and more likely to allow their hosts to steer them toward worthwhile attractions.⁴⁷ All of this meant that Gatorland had a healthy shot at competing in this demographic.

⁴⁶ McHugh, interview, 7 April.

⁴⁷ Market Facts, Inc. “The Visit Friends and Relatives Component of Florida Tourism: Prepared for the Florida Department of Commerce and Tourism.” May 1988.

Gatorland is far more affordable than Disney World. Typically, a family of four could visit Gatorland for roughly what a single adult would pay to visit Disney World.⁴⁸ Like other smaller attractions, Gatorland is eager to sell annual passes to local residents. Research shows that residents of Florida who host out of town visitors often accompany them to the attractions, making these hosts a built-in marketing tool.⁴⁹ The more annual passes which are sold to local residents, the more likely these residents are to steer their visitors to Gatorland. Given the value of cultivating a healthy base of annual pass-holders, Gatorland has a vigorous public relations program in which they send seasoned alligator wrestlers and educators throughout the region in promotional activities. For a modest fee, alligator trainers will visit local conventions, birthday parties, schools, bar mitzvahs, local fairs. Aside from the revenue, the ulterior motive is to generate excitement for Gatorland. The more that local residents are reminded about Gatorland, the more likely they are to become loyal pass holders who can help sell the park to their visitors.⁵⁰

Mark McHugh's style of leadership was a marked contrast to Owen and Frank Godwin. Owen and Frank built the park from the ground up, and that rock solid familiarity with the park gave them the confidence, and sometimes overconfidence, to rely on their gut instinct. They rarely looked to the Board of Directors for advice or goal setting. As a newcomer to Gatorland, Mark McHugh sought much greater input from the Board of Directors, the park's managers, and the collective insight from front-line employees. Gatorland is unusual in the lengthy tenure of their employees, as turnover in

⁴⁸ In April 2008, regular admission to Gatorland was 22.99 for adults, 14.99 for children. Disney World admission was \$71 for adults and \$60 for children.

⁴⁹ Market Facts, p.6.

⁵⁰ Tim Williams, interview by author. Orlando FL, 1 April 2008.

the theme park industry is extraordinarily high.⁵¹ At Gatorland there are numerous frontline employees who have upwards of twenty years experience at the park, whereas the industry average is rarely more than a few years. McHugh regularly sought input from all the relevant parties before proceeding with a decision. This open, two-way style of communication was important for building trust among the employees, and it would be needed because Gatorland was faced with another major challenge in the Fall of 2006.

Early on the cool morning of November 6th a fire started due to a defective heating fan used to keep the reptile cages warm. By seven o'clock in the morning, Gatorland's gift shop, administrative offices, and entrance were engulfed in flames. Television news cameras captured eerie images of flames shooting from the historic gator mouth. When McHugh arrived at Gatorland that morning the fire was still raging, but a handful of employees were standing on the sidewalk. "They all looked at me like 'What are you gonna do?'" Some of them were crying and I walked up and put my arm around them and said, 'I've got the weenies, who's got the marshmallows?' They started laughing, but when I walked off I was thinking, 'Oh my God! What *am* I going to do?'"⁵²

With the administrative offices, the gift shop, and the entrance to the park a total loss, Gatorland had to close for repairs. Beyond the structural damage, Gatorland had lost its computer network, sales systems, and telephone systems. The famous gator mouth that Frank had designed in 1962 suffered smoke damage, and the gift shop to which it had been attached was completely destroyed. It took three weeks to clear out the rubble, re-route the entrance to the park, and rewire areas to sell tickets and merchandise. No

⁵¹ Ady Milman. "Hourly Employee Retention in the Attraction Industry: Research from Small and Medium-Sized Facilities in Orlando, Florida," *Journal of Leisure Property* 2, no. 1 (2002): 40-51.

⁵² McHugh, interview, April 7.

employees were laid off during this period. Instead, they were deployed doing clean up duty, scrubbing, planting, hauling, and painting. After the gator mouth had a good sand-blasting and new coat of paint, it was put back in action as the iconic landmark for Gatorland.⁵³

The park could not reopen without all the necessary permitting and clearances from the local government. McHugh was desperate to get the park re-opened before Thanksgiving, one of the few heavy tourist weekends left in the year. Orange County is dependant upon tourism, and the local government officials were willing to go the extra mile to help Gatorland get back on its feet. A meeting was set up in which representatives from all the necessary government departments gathered around a table, reviewed the documents, and signed off on the necessary permits. What usually took six weeks, was accomplished in 45 minutes.⁵⁴ Frank Godwin came out of retirement to help with demolition and start work on a long-term plan for a new design. The park opened three weeks after the fire, in time for Thanksgiving weekend, and without having to lay off a single employee during the hiatus.

All the cooperation from the county and sympathy from the local community could not help Gatorland with the financial strain of the fire. Gatorland's insurance covered replacement cost only. With the exception of a relatively new gift shop, the buildings which had been destroyed were old, out-dated, and barely adequate for the needs they had been serving. Since Owen Godwin opened the park in 1949, improvements have been added to Gatorland in a piecemeal fashion. The company has always been reluctant to take on debt, which meant that most of its buildings and

⁵³ Mike Godwin, interview by author, Orlando FL 24 March 2009.

⁵⁴ McHugh, interview, April 7.

attractions had been added onto, repaired, or replaced in a gradual fashion over the decades. It made little sense to replicate something that was already straining at the seams, but the insurance payout would not be sufficient to fund substantial improvements. After careful reflection, it was decided to undertake a significant loan in order to design buildings suitable to the size and sophistication that the park had evolved into. New plans were drawn up, adding an additional seven thousand square feet of space, an improved conference facility, and an expanded gift shop, but costing more than twice what the insurance would cover.⁵⁵ This investment was a sign of confidence from Gatorland's Board of Directors in the long-term health of the company.

Conclusion

In the course of sixty years, Gatorland has evolved from a typical roadside attraction into one of the most charming theme parks in Florida.⁵⁶ It escaped the malaise which effects so many family run businesses in which subsequent generations are either disinterested in the hard work of maintaining a business, or lack the wider perspective necessary to stay nimble in a changing environment. Owen Godwin had the audacity and vision to dream big, yet it is unlikely that the park would have flourished without the practical know-how of the founder's son, Frank Godwin. It was Frank's foresight that saved the park from obscurity during the rise of Disney and the coming of the highways. Frank also expanded and improved the park during his twenty years at the helm, leaving his son-in-law a world class park to promote. It was Mark McHugh's vision to realign operations, incentivise

⁵⁵ Frank Godwin, interview, March 25.

⁵⁶ Gatorland regularly wins the "Best Attraction" award from the annual poll conducted by the *Florida Monthly Magazine*.

the staff, and seek out untapped forms of revenue which has kept the park alive when most of its peers have folded.

Gatorland's survival was also dependant on a healthy dose of luck. The coming of the major highways wiped out dozens of high quality attractions, but unlike most of its competitors, Gatorland was only five miles away from the Florida turnpike and close enough to fight for some of that passing traffic. Likewise, Disney World is close enough that Gatorland can siphon a small percentage of its visitors. This stroke of luck, combined with a winning attraction and strong leadership, has allowed Gatorland to survive in an era when most of its competitors have folded.